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FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Note by the Secretary-General

1. The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the Statistical Commission the note on the fundamental principles of official statistics (see the annex below) which was considered by the Statistical Commission's Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination at its sixteenth session (Geneva, 13-16 September 1993). This note is transmitted to the Commission in accordance with the request of the Working Group (E/CN.3/1994/2, para. 28).

2. The Working Group's consideration of the fundamental principles is contained in the report on its sixteenth session (E/CN.3/1994/2, paras. 25-29). Annex II to that report contains the amended preamble to the fundamental principles as approved by the Working Group. The text of the fundamental principles (E/CN.3/1993/26, annex) will be made available to the Commission.

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* E/CN.3/1994/1.

Annex

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Note by the Secretary-General*

INTRODUCTION

1. At its twenty-seventh session, the Statistical Commission considered decision C (47) of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) on fundamental principles of official statistics in the ECE region, as transmitted in a note by the United Nations Secretariat (E/CN.3/1993/26). That note indicated that the Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat (UNSTAT) had circulated a copy of the principles in August 1992 to all members of the Statistical Commission, the regional commissions and a number of other international organizations. It also indicated that those countries and organizations which had responded had expressed support for establishing similar principles at the global level and had supported the proposal that the subject be included in the agenda for the twenty-seventh session of the Commission.

2. The Commission expressed support for the ideas underlying ECE decision C (47). a/ The Commission requested the Working Group to contact the regional statistical divisions with a view to having ECE decision C (47) circulated to all countries in their regions, indicating the views expressed by the Statistical Commission, and to request the regional divisions to consult with countries and obtain their opinions concerning the possible application and usefulness at the regional and global levels b/ of the principles set out in the decision.

3. The regional commissions carried out the consultations within their regions by mail between March and June 1993 and provided the results to UNSTAT during June in the form of copies, extracts or summaries of countries' responses. As the Conference of European Statisticians was of the opinion that ECE decision C (47) was of universal significance, additional consultations with ECE countries were not held in the context of the present round of consultations. The results of the consultations in the other regions are summarized in paragraphs 4-6 below. Extracts from the responses will be available to the Working Group as a background document.

4. Sixty-one replies were received. All but two expressed agreement with and support for the principles in general. The other two did not express a view but provided information on their national practices, which were not at variance with the principles. Many specifically indicated support for the adoption of

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* The present note was issued in English and Spanish for the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination at its sixteenth session in document E/CN.3/AC.1/1993/R.7.

the principles at the regional and/or global levels. Several suggested specific changes to the text of some of the articles. Others suggested additional principles. The suggested modified and additional texts are contained in the appendix below.

5. Many countries indicated that the general intent of the principles was already in force and detailed various specific ways in which the principles were already incorporated in their statistical laws, institutions and practices or would be incorporated in future changes. Some indicated what actions and conditions would be essential for implementing the principles. Others indicated what they considered would be the positive benefits resulting from application of the principles at regional and global levels.

6. One respondent expressed the opinion that, when drawing up fundamental global principles of official statistics, it would be essential to take into consideration differences in the level of statistics and in economic, political and social development between different countries and areas in order to facilitate the formulation of principles which could be meaningfully applied by all official statistical agencies. Another respondent indicated that current conditions in the country would make it difficult to introduce the principles in the immediate future. Several indicated that principle IX (on the use of international concepts, definitions and classifications) would be applicable only in the long term. Another indicated a preference for an accelerated timetable for drafting global principles, so that they could be considered by the Statistical Commission in 1994. Several, particularly in the regions of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), indicated that the appropriate regional commission should take the initiative in promoting the principles in its region. One country from the ECLAC region indicated that any principles should be adopted in the framework of an Inter-American Meeting of Directors of Statistics. One country from the ESCAP region specified that any regional principles should be considered by the ESCAP Working Group of Statistical Experts.

7. As requested by the Commission, the Working Group, at its sixteenth session, may wish to review the results of the consultations and set up further plans, with a view to preparing a draft set of principles at the global level for presentation to the Commission at its twenty-eighth session, in 1995. c/

Notes

a/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1993, Supplement No. 6 (E/1993/26), para. 231.

b/ Ibid., para. 232 (a).

c/ Ibid., para. 232 (c).

Appendix

MODIFICATIONS/ADDITIONS SUGGESTED BY COUNTRIES TO THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF OFFICIAL STATISTICS AS SET OUT IN DECISION C (47) OF THE ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE a/, b/

1. "IX. The use by statistical agencies in each country of international concepts, classifications and methods, as much as possible, promotes the consistency and efficiency of statistical systems at all official levels".

2. If a similar decision were to be prepared for the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, it would be important to include in the preambular part a paragraph reading as follows: "Recalling the provisions and recommendations of the Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in Africa in the 1990s, adopted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa at its twenty-fifth session in resolution 683 (XXV) of 19 May 1990, and desiring to implement them in their countries ...".

3. Principle IX should allow for the modification of international concepts, classifications and methods to suit the local conditions of each country in order to make the statistics of practical value to local users.

4. Preambular paragraph 4 should refer to decisions taken primarily within the United Nations Statistical Commission, although some of the references it contains could be retained. Kindly refer to the amendments shown below, which assume that the principles are conceived within an international context:

(a) Preambular paragraph 1: replace "The States and peoples of the region" with "States and people";

(b) Preambular paragraph 3: after "enterprises" add "establishments";

(c) Preambular paragraph 5: after "governmental" delete "and non-governmental organizations" and replace with "non-governmental, regional and intergovernmental organizations";

(d) Preambular paragraph 7: delete "within the Conference of European Statisticians" and substitute "at the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission of the United Nations" and replace "region" with "regions";

(e) In the operative paragraphs replace "agencies" with "agency" and in operative paragraph 8 after "agency" add "and other providers of statistics within the country and/or region".

5. Regarding the initial operative clause, substitute "Adopts the present principles" for "Adopts the present resolution"; otherwise, some paragraphs should start with a verb. Add the following to principle IV: "The statistical agencies are entitled to comment on erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics to any private or public organization or to any individual". Finally, another principle should be added after principle IV, containing the

following: "The statistical organizations are entitled to recommend the cessation or object to the proposition of surveys or censuses that they consider will duplicate other national efforts".

6. We endorse all the principles. However, slight modifications are suggested in the case of principles V, VIII and IX as noted below:

(a) It is suggested that principle V read: "Data for statistical purposes may be drawn from all types of sources, be they statistical surveys and censuses or administrative records. Statistical agencies are to choose the source with regard to quality, timeliness, costs and the burden on respondents.";

(b) It is suggested that principle VIII read: "Coordination among statistical agencies within countries having decentralized official statistical activities is essential to achieve consistency and efficiency in the statistical system.";

(c) It is suggested that principle IX read: "The use by statistical agencies in each country of international concepts and classifications as well as of methods with adaptations to country-specific conditions promotes the consistency and efficiency of statistical systems at all official levels.";

(d) In addition, we recommend including the following principle, believed to have features of universal character: "National forums for interaction between statistical agencies and users of statistics ensure the practical utility of statistics.".

7. We hope to add some elements to the text of fundamental principles to accurately reflect the characteristics of official statistics, such as the definition of official statistics, the role of official statistics in coordinating national statistics through standards, methodology and classifications, and the importance of statistical legislation.

8. The following five points are suggested:

(a) Third preambular paragraph: Insert the words "and reliable" before the words "data needed". The paragraph will read "... in providing appropriate and reliable data needed for ...";

(b) Operative paragraph 1: The statement seems biased, excluding socialist societies. It would be more appropriate to insert the words "and/or socialist society" after the words "system of a democratic society ...". The line would then read "... information system of a democratic society and/or socialist society, serving the Government ...";

(c) Operative paragraph 1: Insert the words "within the realm of legal enactment" after the words "an impartial basis" and the word "aggregated" before the words "public information". The sentence would then read "... are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis within the realm of legal enactment by statistical agencies to honour citizens' entitlement to aggregated public information";

(d) Operative paragraph 2: Insert the words "and integrity" after the words "To retain trust ...". The line would then read "To retain trust and integrity in official statistics ...";

(e) Operative paragraph 8: Add the following: "Coordination and integration between national ministries/departments for the purpose of data collection".

9. It is suggested that the following additional item be included in these principles: "Information and statistics on one particular subject may be collected and compiled in some countries by two or more organizations or agencies, according to their particular duties or requirements, which may not be consistent with one another because of differences in definitions, concepts, approaches, procedures etc. International organizations should be advised to only accept and rely on official statistics provided by official statistical centres, unless data supplied by other agencies and organizations are approved by such official statistical centres."

10. The following changes are suggested:

(a) Principle I: In the last sentence it would be useful to make the following revision: "... available on an impartial basis (and without political intervention) by official statistical agencies";

(b) Principle II include a final sentence: "The procedures under which statistical information is released should be documented".

11. Effective dissemination of official statistics is just as critical as the production of quality statistics. It is therefore suggested that the following additional item be included among the fundamental principles of official statistics: "To respond to the current and evolving need of users and customers, the statistical agencies are to develop strategies for more effective dissemination and utilization of official statistics."

Notes

a/ E/CN.3/1993/26, annex.

b/ The underlining indicates new wording.